You asked about sound and it's 28 January 2008

Rachel Blau DuPlessis
National Humanities Centre
North Carolina

Sound validates the rectitude of the poem. Sound constructs the rectitude of the poem. One needs the Italian difference between *esse* and *stare*. Sonorita sta; it doesn't just "is."

When sound and syntax slip into place, the poem solidifies itself and rests on and inside itself. It embodies what it is.

Keats's famous statement is in fact completely accurate. I mean (the letter of 27 February 1818): "I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity—it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance" (to John Taylor). That is, the sound strikes the reader first, the sound is processed and engaged microseconds before any message. The message arrives second to that sound and thus appears as a "Remembrance" of a reader's "thoughts"—that is, a reader is attuned to the statement and thinks it has come from herself because the sound has already forged it entering body just prior to entering into consciousness.

ESC 33.4 (December 2007): 21–23

Sound in poetry is not the only thing, but it's a very large thing. When things sprong together in writing a work, sound is often at the base. By sound—the whole bolus—I mean actual sonic business (phonemes, assonance, consonance, all those named things that buzz around). But I also mean the way syntax brings certain words to the foreground and indicates semantic emphasis. And I mean the way the line is used to produce an effect from syntax and sound together. Do I sound this out when I write? I know what it sounds like, that's for sure.

A word-cum-sound can crunch the whole poem in place. Every sound word sounded is the keystone of a poem. Well, really. How many keystones can a poem have? Answer: a lot. All the words have to be there; none can be another word, none should feel excise-able. So every sounded word's sound is indeed the keystone of a poem. Hey—if you don't think that way, don't bother.

This metaphor of multiple keystones is so illogical, so contrary to the laws of physics that it re-speaks the question of excess (as Steve McCaffery did once in *North of Intention*). He speaks about expenditure via sound as in a potlatch economy, not integration or tucking sound in tidily. Sound is both excessive to straight up-down thetic and semantic meaning and (paradoxically) crucial to that meaning. "I like Ike" indeed. The underpinnings get to you every time. Pace McCaffery, activities of excess are not necessarily non-utilitarian. But the utility can be placed in a Barthean economy of pleasure, not bliss (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*).

If rhyme gives pleasure (disclosure, finish, meaning, unveiling, clicking closed), then sound all over the texture of the poem and the rhythms of sound give bliss. Poetry is a cunning interplay between evocations of bliss and pleasure. Bliss is the unknown. It is transgressive, polymorphous, floating between the unfixed and the more unfixed. Bliss turns verse to its own uses. Is perverse, inverted, on the other side, obverse. It worms in. Bliss dissolves boundaries (as between I-thou) and dissolves consciousness and subjectivity. So sound is seduction. O eros. You have arrived and cannot have a footnote. When I heard Sappho read in Greek (at PennSound) I wanted to leap back across 2,668 years. O yes.

Sound is cruising you. Bliss is a scandal. It is difficult. It is a shock. It brings tears to the eyes. (It makes your hair stand up....)

Rachel Blau DuPlessis's ongoing long poem project, begun in 1986, is collected in *Torques: Drafts 58–76* (Salt Publishing, 2007) as well as in *Drafts 1–38, Toll* (Wesleyan UP, 2001) and *Drafts 39–57, Pledge, with Draft unnumbered: Précis* (Salt Publishing, 2004). *Pitch: Drafts 77–95* is forthcoming (Salt Publishing). In 2006, two books of her innovative essays were published: *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*, on gender and poetics, along with reprinting of the groundbreaking *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*, (University of Alabama Press). In 2002 she was also awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, in 2007, a residency for poetry at Bellagio, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, and in 2008–09, an appointment to the National Humanities Center in North Carolina. Her website is http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/duplessis.

The bliss of sound in poetry is sublime. It engages some kind of hypno-sensual stratum. When done very finely, sound in a poem might tune our bodies the way a vibrating gong does. Sound in poetry has many overtones. (Some of these are sense.) H. D., Dickinson, Stevens, Keats.